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Cut U.S. Troops in Korea Now

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During President Roh Tae Woo's recent Washington visit, President Reagan mused off the cuff that we might reduce our 44,000 troops in South Korea or withdraw them if tensions in the region lessened. Although that musing has barely begun, now is the time to start small cuts in our forces and to begin lowering our military profile.

South Korea is an increasingly strong and stable ally; its economic miracle continues; it has made remarkable strides in democratization, and we can tell its hosting of the Olympics was a triumph. Vitality important too, the balance of military power on the peninsula is gradually shifting in favor of the South, despite enormous military efforts in North Korea. Sometime in the mid- or latter 1990's, given present trends, Seoul will be able to defend against any North Korean thrust.

Because Pyongyang's bellicosity has not yet diminished and an indigenous military balance has not been achieved, and because the stability throughout northeast Asia depends on continued peace in Korea, it is essential to hold off for a time the American budget-cutters and Korean advocates of premature American withdrawal.

Meanwhile, there are a number of measures America can undertake that would preserve the essentials of our position, constrain Kim Il Sung in the North and defuse growing anti-Americanism in the South. First, and of primary importance, our military profile should be lowered. We should revise the command arrangements under which an American general leads the Combined Forces Command, despite the fact that the vast bulk of the forces under him are South Korean. Also, America's military headquarters in downtown Seoul should be relocated and the site (and its golf course) turned over to the South Koreans.

Second, for the next two or three years a small number of American troops, say initially 10 percent of the 44,000, should be withdrawn. By the mid-90's, most or all of the ground forces can probably be withdrawn. As the Koreans increasingly pick up support functions for the remaining American troops, they should simultaneously pay a larger share — indeed virtually all — of the local currency costs of the American troop presence. Although Seoul already shares a large part of the burden, American domestic politics and defense budgeting require even more.

Third, the heat in the trade dialogue needs to be reduced. It would be a major improvement if negotiations were focused not on item-by-item disputes but on broader topics such as exchange rates and South Korea's progressively accepting General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade responsibilities.

Fourth, now that Seoul has abandoned its aim of isolating the North in favor of reconciliation, America should try hard to draw the North into a more rational relationship — gradually normalizing relations, including establishing an office in Pyongyang and resuming nonstrategic trade. Japan should play a role, perhaps the

leading role, in bringing North Korea out of its isolation.

Despite misgivings in some South Korean conservative and military circles, the vast majority of South Koreans want reconciliation with the North as rapidly as possible, with reunification in some form as the goal. President Roh's offers of a non-aggression pact, open trade and an international peace conference, as well as his willingness to go to Pyongyang for a summit meeting (and the faint signals of responsiveness from there) all indicate the logjam on the peninsula may be beginning to break up.

American policy in these changing circumstances faces twin dangers. If we try to hold to the status quo, we can derail North-South progress and undermine our position in the South. If we respond to early signs of a thaw by prematurely removing our troops, we can upset the regional military balance and scound the whole tentative reconciliation process to abort — perhaps even precipitate the conflict we have helped deter for 35 years. If, on the other hand, we take sensible steps for change now and remain constant in our commitments, the prospects for peace and stability in the area are bright.